

The Final Flight of LTC Lee Roupe: A Story of Honor

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Fellow MSCs –As many of you know LTC Cephus Lee Roupe died on 2 March 2012. His wife granted me a tremendous honor and asked me to serve as Lee's escort. This note will tell of the amazing outpouring of love and honor that I was privileged to witness while executing duties as his escort.

By way of background Lee was just 48 hours into his transition leave and preparations for retirement when he died suddenly of an apparent heart attack. His family and the staff of Southern Regional Medical Command (SRMC) were diligently planning for his retirement ceremony at Fort Hood with a grand celebration at his home in Salado, Texas. Lee's tragic and shocking loss highlights for all of us that we need to make the most of every day we are given.

On 9 March 2012 MG Wong and the SRMC hosted a Memorial Service for LTC Roupe. MG Wong honored Lee in his remarks and together with CSM Huffman presented Lee's wife with Lee's Legion of Merit – his 22nd ribbon. MG Rubenstein and I provided remarks and eulogized Lee. Lee's daughter put together a moving slide show that truly captured the essence of the man, the husband, the Soldier. Lee's other daughter assisted in the logistics of the service. She was instrumental in working with the Casualty Assistance Officer, MAJ John Lopez, to get the Family to San Antonio for the service. Both daughters were amazing in their strength and support of their Mother during this difficult time. The SRMC Staff did an absolutely superb job planning and executing a first class service – a fitting memorial to a fallen comrade.

On 10 March 2012 the Church of Christ in Salado, the family's home congregation, conducted a Chapel Service with a viewing. This was a dignified and respectful service attended by a large contingent of their Family and friends. Of significant note, the Patriot's Guards also attended. They are another group of people who voluntarily give of their time to escort the hearse to the chapel and post American Flags outside the Church. These great Americans then stand guard by the flags to ensure that the service is executed without any disruption by would-be-protestors. Their dedication to this task in support of our fallen comrade was even more impressive given cold temperatures and the steady rain that fell during most of the two hour service.

The Family's Casualty Assistance Officer, MAJ John Lopez, was superb and Lee's wife was very thankful for his support and professionalism. MAJ Lopez was very

instrumental in coordinating Lee's burial at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC). Through his faithful and diligent dedication to the task, he was able to ensure Lee's internment was scheduled for 5 April 2012 at ANC. The four week wait is common as ANC is regrettably very busy and conducts approximately 25-30 burials per day. These very long weeks passed remarkably quickly and soon it was time to escort Lee to his final resting place.

On 3 April 2012, at 0400, I arrived at the Hewitt-Arney Funeral Home in Temple Texas to ensure Lee was ready for travel. The staff at the funeral home was very good to Lee and his Family during the entire process including the processing, viewing, and chapel service. Mr. Arney, leaving no detail to chance, had already ensured that all affairs were in order and very carefully drove us the more than 150 miles to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (DFW). We arrived at DFW at 0830 and were met curbside by Ms. Tonya Pinkos, the Flight Services Manager for American Airlines. She immediately took charge and walked me through the complete process and completed all the necessary paperwork. Following our discussion, at least six men approached me and told me they had served in the Army, Marines or Navy. Ms. Pinkos had served in the Air Force and the Army National Guard. Each of these individuals and several others offered their condolences and said they would take excellent care of LTC Roupe. At one point, I expressed concern that LTC Roupe would be out of my sight while they did the security checks. I was greatly relieved and appreciative when a ground crewman approached me, stood up straight, saluted, and said he served with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Viet Nam. He said he would personally ensure that LTC Roupe was well cared for and placed aboard the aircraft with honor.

As he moved off he joined a team of six other ground crewmen who reverently pulled out a folded American Flag and carefully and properly placed it on the boxed casket. They then carefully placed the flagged draped casket onto a luggage cart. The luggage cart itself was modified and was painted red and when closed, its curtains formed the American Flag. They then processed Lee for the flight and transported him planeside. Ms. Pinkos then took me to pick up Lee's wife, MAJ Lopez and the Family for transportation to the departure gate. Upon our arrival at the gate, the Captain (Pilot) of the flight came out and shook hands with each member of the family's group. He offered his condolences and told us that it was his honor to fly LTC Roupe, a fellow pilot, to his final resting place. Ms. Pinkos provided the two grandchildren with stuffed dolls that have a photo holder on the front for them to place a picture of their Paw-paw (their loving pseudonym for their grandfather). She then took the microphone and made the initial boarding call. She explained to the passengers that this would be a special flight as it would carry LTC Roupe to his final resting place. She explained the process and read a short biography on LTC Roupe to the waiting passengers. She then escorted Lee's wife and the group down to planeside. When Lee's wife and the Family arrived, the ground crew had Lee's

flag draped and boxed casket positioned on the bottom portion of the conveyor belt with six crew man flanking the casket. As I called "Attention" and "Present Arms" the six ground crewman stepped back holding the colors taut while the conveyor operator began moving LTC Roupe into the aircraft. As the baggage cart moved away, the ground crewmen then side-stepped away from the conveyor belt and conducted remarkably appropriate flag folding procedures. They then presented the folded flag to a seventh crewman and then marched off as a group. The Family was very moved by this extra attention and care. Ms. Pinkos then escorted Lee's wife and the group to the aircraft. She had arranged to have the entire group upgraded to first class. It was clear that several passengers had voluntarily given up their first class seats in order to accommodate the entire group.

Once we arrived at Dulles International Airport the pilot made a second announcement and asked for the other passengers to remain seated while the Roupe Family and escorts deplaned. I was skeptical that this would occur. In my experience on every flight I have ever been on once the seatbelt light chimes off the passengers jump to their feet and clog the aisle. On this flight, as I helped Lee's wife up I looked back and the aisle was clear from front to back. All passengers had remained seated and silent. This really impressed me.

At Dulles we were met by LTC Navarro, who served as the District of Columbia Area Casualty Assistance Officer assisting Lee's wife and Family. He accompanied me planeside to pay his respect and witness Lee's transfer from the plane. The entire ground crew at Dulles was professional and appropriate, going well out of their way to ensure that both Lee and the Family were treated with respect and honor. They ensured that Lee's wife and the Family received their baggage first by a separate baggage cart. Lee and I were taken directly to the cargo area where we met a representative from the Murphy Funeral Home. We transferred Lee to the hearse and drove to the funeral home. Upon arrival we finalized the paperwork and ensured the casket was in perfect condition. They also removed the flag to have it pressed and prepared for the burial service.

I returned to the Murphy Funeral Home on 5 April at 1130. We inspected and re-verified that Lee's casket was ready for the service and we transferred him to the hearse. When we departed the funeral home on our way to ANC, we were escorted by approximately 18 members of the Patriots Guard. Their assistance in navigating through the hectic DC traffic was a godsend. We arrived at ANC and attended the briefing with Lee's wife and the Family on the burial process. The room was full of DUSTOFF leaders, both past and present. BG Poppe represented LTG Horoho and LTG (R) and Mrs. Schoomaker were present. Following the briefing the attendees drove to the transfer point where members of Company B, 1st Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), elements

of the Army Band, and four white horses and the caisson were assembled. While the Soldiers stood and saluted and the band played, Lee was transferred from the hearse to the caisson.

The Company Commander led the procession followed by Chaplain (Colonel) Don Wilson, Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Keith Croom, and I. The caisson carrying Lee, the band, and attendees followed moving at a dignified and measured pace past the rows of marble headstones marking the final resting place of the other heroes at Arlington. Once we arrived at the grave site, we saluted while the band played and the honor guard moved Lee from the caisson. The chaplains and I led the Soldiers graveside where they positioned Lee for the ceremony. Chaplain Wilson then spoke both as a chaplain and friend of Lee's, and concluded with a very powerful prayer. The firing party fired three crisp volleys followed by the playing Taps by a bugler from The Army Band. The Honor Guard folded the colors and presented them to the Commander of Troops who in turn presented them to me. I then had the solemn honor of presenting the flag from the casket to Lee's wife. I then presented two other flags, both reverently touched to the casket, to Lee's daughters. A final flag that had also been touched to the casket was presented to BG Poppe who presented it to Lee's parents.

It was now time for the final salute. In a divine bit of timing, just as the Commander of Troops directed "Present Arms," we heard the unmistakable sound of a Blackhawk helicopter in a turn just outside the ANC airspace. I was looking straight ahead but was able to see Lee's wife look up and see the helicopter. It was simply amazing timing. You see, Lee was a master rated aviator having flown several thousand hours in six types of rotary and fixed wing aircraft. She told me later how she knew Lee would have loved knowing that a Blackhawk had flown by at his funeral.

Chaplain Croom and the Arlington National Cemetery representative then thanked everyone for attending and asked for the attendees to please pay their respects to the Family as the final portion of the ceremony.

Afterwards, the Family hosted a small reception for Family and guests at the Fort Meyer Officer's Club. Many tears were shed, but far more faces broke into smiles and laughter as Family and friends alike shared "remember when Lee..." stories.

This was one of the most amazing experiences in my military career. I thank God that I knew and served with Lee. He was my comrade and my friend. I will forever be both humbled and proud that Lee's wife honored me with this mission.

Thank you all for your service to our Nation, as I witnessed and described above, it is truly appreciated. DUSTOFF!